MEDIATIZED SOCIAL VALUES AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS BY BULGARIANS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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Abstract. *Social values become progressively more important in the contemporary complex and diversified media environment. Media culture in postmodernity is the foundation on which social psychological attitudes, values, worldviews and tastes are built. The digitalization of modern society is a twofold process – on the one hand, it creates numerous opportunities for the affirmation of personal and civil freedoms, but on the other hand, it becomes a fertile environment for the appearance of negative phenomena, such as xenophobia, racism, sexism, hate speech and intolerance. The main hypothesis of the study is that certain values are deeply embedded in the mediatized society of each particular country. For this aim an empirical study has been done with respondents in Bulgaria. They have been asked what social values in their opinion the Bulgarian media uphold. Between the chosen values presented to the informants are: freedom and independence; moral and civil responsibility; justice and equality; fairness and transparency; empathy and respect; lifelong education and learning; culture and tradition; patriotism; and family and community values. Moreover, the respondents are asked to rate from 1 to 5 the extent to which these values are upheld by the media in the society. For all the above mentioned values the informants have chosen the average rate 3 ("neither much, nor less"). Based on the received answers it can be concluded that the majority of the Bulgarian respondents do not believe that maintaining and cherishing social values is nowadays a priority for the media. This means that social crises in post-totalitarian societies may simultaneously be perceived as media crises too. However, this hypothesis should be further developed and tested by comparing different post-totalitarian countries and their media environments.*

Key words: *media, social values, perceptions, Bulgarians, empirical study.*

МЕДІАТИЗОВАНІ СОЦІАЛЬНІ ЦІННОСТІ ТА ЇХ СПРИЙНЯТТЯ БОЛГАРАМИ: ЕМПІРИЧНЕ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ

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Анотація. *У сучасному складному та різноманітному медіасередовищі роль соціальних цінностей стає дедалі важливішою. Медіакультура епохи постмодерну є фундаментом, на якому формуються соціально-психологічні установки, ціннісні орієнтири, світогляд та естетичні смаки. Цифровізація сучасного суспільства постає двояким процесом: з одного боку, вона відкриває численні можливості для утвердження особистих і громадянських свобод, а з іншого – створює сприятливе підґрунтя для виникнення таких негативних явищ, як ксенофобія, расизм, сексизм, мова ворожнечі та нетерпимість.*

Основна гіпотеза дослідження полягає в тому, що певні цінності глибоко інтегровані в медіати-зоване суспільство кожної окремої країни. З цією метою було проведено емпіричне дослідження за

участю респондентів із Болгарії. Учасникам було запропоновано визначити соціальні цінності, які, на їхню думку, підтримують болгарські медіа. Серед запропонованих інформантам цінностей були: свобода та незалежність; моральна та громадянська відповідальність; справедливість і рівність; чесність і прозорість; емпатія та повага; освіта й навчання впродовж життя; культура і традиції; патріотизм; сімейні та громадські цінності. Крім того, респонденти мали оцінити за п'ятибальною шкалою (від 1 до 5) ступінь підтримки цих цінностей медіа в суспільстві. За всіма зазначеними позиціями інформанти обрали середню оцінку 3 («ні багато, ні мало»).

На підставі отриманих відповідей можна дійти висновку, що більшість болгарських респондентів не вважають підтримку та утвердження соціальних цінностей пріоритетним завданням сучасних медіа. Це дає підстави припускати, що соціальні кризи в посттоталітарних суспільствах можуть одночасно сприйматися і як криза медіа. Водночас ця гіпотеза потребує подальшого розвитку та перевірки шляхом порівняльного аналізу медіасередовищ різних посттоталітарних країн.

Ключові слова: *медіа, соціальні цінності, сприйняття, болгари, емпіричне дослідження.*

Problem Statement. Social values in postmodernity have emerged as a complex and socially significant problem that affects all spheres of the mediatized society – from political systems and legal regulation, to the economy, media and entertainment industries, media pedagogy and education. Values are responsible for the formation of different models of democracies, and at the same time they relate to some of the main problems with information in the global world. In the era of post Covid-19 rumors and disinformation have become a real challenge for traditional media. The latter not only have to regularly and accurately inform their audiences about events, but nowadays they have to actively oppose to myths and conspiracy theories too. Thus, a paradoxical situation has been created – on the one hand, key values of modern society are freedom of speech, pluralism of opinions and tolerance. On the other hand, it is necessary for the media to actively oppose disinformation, thus limiting freedom of expression.

Media culture in postmodernity becomes the foundation on which social psychological attitudes, values, worldviews and tastes are built. It also presupposes the development of civil self-awareness as well as the assertion of individual and collective identities, as never before. Thus, the medialization of society represents a complex interaction between the media and the diverse social strata and fragments of society. The fragmentation and diversification of society deepens even further in the new digital environment, which naturally creates the conditions for the proliferation of virtual communities and identities.

In his book on the construction of news in the press, Sam Lebovitz (2016) [6] puts forward the idea of a mediatized capitalism, which, according to him, is a complex synthesis of history, law, administration, economic forces and the media. The author also outlines the main challenges in front of the press in the modern era – unable to maintain old circulations in the age of the Internet, the newspapers and magazines limit the number of their reporters, and thus the opportunities for investigative and interpretive journalism. As a result, the classical media, Lebovitz argues, are less able to serve as a corrective to the processes in society. In this regard, freedom of expression depends not only on the specific political situation and on the legislative framework in a given country – the challenges are also outlined by the weakening influence of the classical media, which have previously had a strong impact on society.

Simultaneously, even nowadays some scholars build their analyses on the so called "cultivation theory", proposed by Gerbner (1998) [3] which initially was related to the electronic media and to the television in particular. According to these researchers, the broadcast of violence on television is one of the main reasons for the development of violence and aggression in society. A number of social psychologists, such as Susan Herley (2004) [4], emphasize on the tendency of some individuals to "imitate" behavior that they perceive from the electronic media, including staging robberies, kidnappings and other criminal offenses based on films or even on broadcast footage by TV reporters. This is why researchers also raise questions related to the ethics of public and mass communication: should freedom of speech include the expression of aggression and how to regulate violence, aggression and hatred in the media?

In this relation, there are numerous studies of hate speech in the press and in the electronic media. In his research, van Dijk (2016) [9]

underlines the functions of the news in the formation of public opinion. Based on a discourse analysis of media content, the scientist comes to the conclusion that the news, even in the European Union, is often a demonstration of hatred, xenophobia and racism. According to the researcher, the European majorities still underestimate representatives of ethnic minorities, immigrants and refugees. In this regard, Christopher Josie (2010) [5], too, offers a detailed analysis of the discourse of racism and hatred in the digital space. By distinguishing between "overt" and "covert" racism, the researcher argues that the introduction of new technologies supports the emergence of new strategies for creation and maintenance of identities based on xenophobia and racism.

Hate speech has become even a more complex and significant problem with the digitalization of the media. According to Jack Batkin (2004) [1], due to the digitalization of mass communication today, the opportunities for individual participation and contribution to society have significantly increased, but simultaneously, the same technologies that provide many personal freedoms create and produce new methods for tracking, influencing and even controlling the public opinion.

Most of the researchers also emphasize on the active citizenship that develops with the digitalization of media. Authors, such as Frank Fisher (2009) [2], even claim that in a number of European countries the Internet gives a new impetus to actively participate during political elections and important public decision-making. In such a way, the Internet becomes an important element of the democratic revival or even a main mechanism for transformation of democratic models. All these problems bring to the fore the theory of the spiral of silence, first presented by Noele-Neumann (1974) [7]. This theory emphasizes the ability of electronic media to create public opinion that is shared by the majority, while the views of the minority are suppressed or ignored. According to Noele-Neumann, individuals who do not share the majority's opinion are forced to remain silent in order to avoid stigmatization and isolation in society. In such a way, according to the author, electronic media create the illusion of social consensus.

If the theory of the spiral of silence seems justified for traditional media, the postmodern processes demonstrate its limited application in relation to the digital media. The Internet and the social media impose an individualization of public communication and thus create numerous opportunities for the establishment of minority identities and views. Thus, in the digital space, there is exactly the opposite process – disintegration and fragmentation of public opinion, a phenomenon that in some cases can lead to the loss of public consensus (Petkova, 2023) [8]. However, based on various analyses, it becomes clear that the digitalization of modern society is a twofold process – on the one hand, it creates numerous opportunities for the affirmation of personal and civil liberties, but on the other hand, it becomes a fertile environment for the appearance of negative phenomena, such as xenophobia, racism, sexism, hate speech and intolerance, as well as disinformation and circulation of rumors and conspiracy theories.

Article Purpose and Task. Media pluralism is an important topic for a debate and analysis specifically in the post-socialist countries. Bulgaria, for example, has continued to define itself as a "transitional democracy" for more than 30 years. In post-totalitarian societies, there is an interesting phenomenon: while the traditional press can be strongly influenced by business interests and political parties, social media, on the contrary, lacks any censorship or even regulation. This has both positive and negative sides. On the one hand, individuals can freely express their points of view, but on the other, rumors and fake news become a constant part of the daily life of Bulgarians. Analyses done by the Pew Research Institute (2018) [10] point to the difficulty with which the Eastern European societies adapt to the traditional European values and norms, such as individualism, freedom of speech, acceptance of "others", as well as to the openness towards ethnic, religious, cultural and sexual minorities. Thus, the main goal of the paper is to analyze how contemporary Bulgarians perceive social values presented by the media.

Research Subject and Object. The study of the basic values in postmodern Bulgarian culture can provide answers to numerous questions, such as: why do Bulgarians even nowadays consider their country "a transitional democracy"? What is the importance of the media in shaping these values in the post-totalitarian states? Also, there are certain historical and cultural factors that

underline the contemporary state of the media in the post-totalitarian countries. The study of values can provide answers to a number of problems related to media pluralism in the new digital environment too. The main hypothesis of the study is that certain values are deeply embedded in the mediatized society of each particular country. For this aim an empirical study has been done with respondents in Bulgaria.

Presentation of Basic Research material

Up to the beginning of May 2025, 429 Bulgarian respondents have been interviewed by means of an online questionnaire. Most of the respondents belong to the age group 18–25 (170 people), 53 are between 26 and 35 years old, 94 belong to the age group 36–45, 76 are between 46 and 55 years old, 22 are between 56 and 65 years old and only 16 people are over 66. Thus, mostly younger people are represented in this study. In such a way some tendencies in the evaluation of social values by the younger generations in Bulgaria can be outlined (Fig. 1).

The respondents have been asked what social values in their opinion the Bulgarian media uphold. Between the chosen values presented to the informants are: freedom and independence; moral and civil responsibility; justice and equality; fairness and transparency; empathy and respect; lifelong education and learning; culture and tradition; patriotism; and family and community values. Moreover, the respondents are asked to rate the extent to which these values are upheld by the media in the society, as 1 is the most, 2 is much, 3 neither much, nor less, 4 is little and 5 is the least.

The majority of the respondents have chosen for each value the average rate 3 (neither much, nor less): 155 informants have ticked "neither much nor less" for freedom and independence, 165 – for moral and civil responsibility, 186 – for justice and equality, 126 – for fairness and transparency. Among the respondents 174 have also chosen the average rate 3 for empathy and respect, 183 – for welfare and security, 162 for education, 152 for culture and traditions, 158 for patriotism and 174 – for family and community values. The most positive responses have also been given for "culture and tradition" and "patriotism" and the most negative – for "fairness and transparency".

Based on the received answers it can be concluded that the predominant part of the Bulgarian respondents do not think that Bulgarian media place special emphasis on social values. However, they also believe that media most often do not stick to fairness and transparency. Also, according to the interviewed Bulgarians the most cherished values by the Bulgarian media are the culture and national traditions as well as patriotism (see Fig. 2 and 3).

Conclusions and prospects of further developments. The study of values is very important in order to outline the media landscape in the post-Covid-19 epoch in different countries and regions. Social values are significant for post-totalitarian societies that can still hold
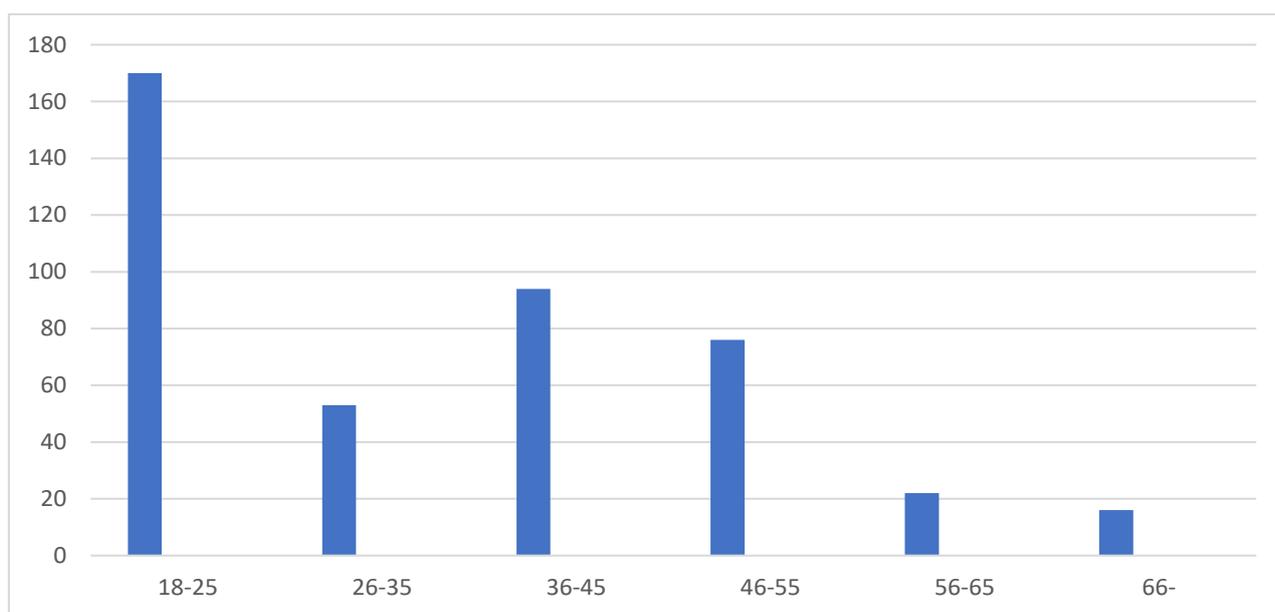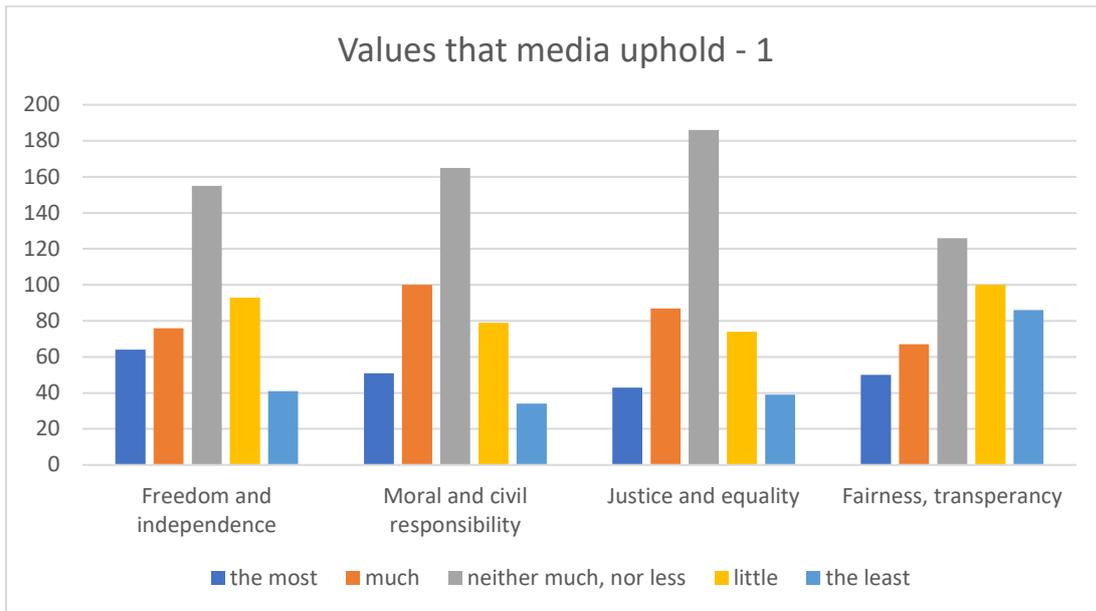

Fig. 1. Age of the respondents

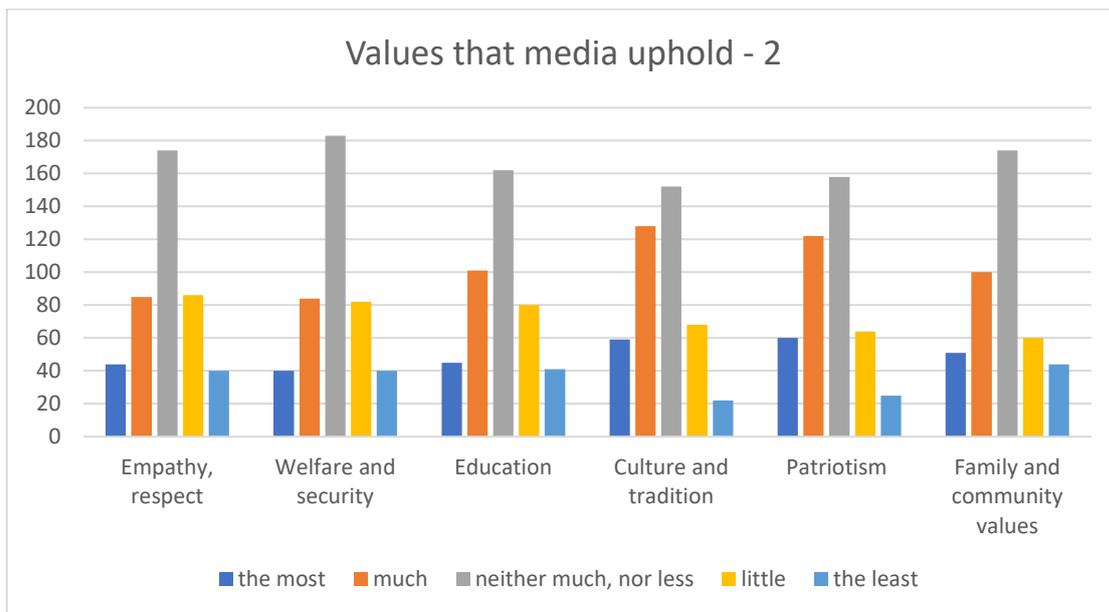**Fig. 2. Values that media uphold**

Fig. 3. Values that media uphold

to the heritage and trauma from the historical past. Simultaneously, the digitalization of communication both provides the opportunities for freedom of expression and presents challenges, as negative phenomena, such as hate speech and intolerance, have been on the rise. The data received from the Bulgarian study clearly indicates that the majority of the respondents do not believe that maintaining and cherishing social values is nowadays a priority for the media. This means that social crises in post-totalitarian societies may simultaneously be perceived as media crises too. This hypothesis should be further developed and tested by comparing different post-totalitarian countries and their media environments. However, the social responsibility of the media is a problem that comes to the fore and becomes progressively more important in the digitalized postmodern era.

Gratitudes

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